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UA3/9/5 Higher Education Reform from the Perspective of a Comprehensive University

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**Pritchard Committee Meeting
Kentucky History Center
Frankfort, Kentucky**

October 15, 2002

**Higher Education Reform From the Perspective
of a Comprehensive University**

Gary A. Ransdell

Governor, I hope you take great pride in this five-year snapshot—and in the resolve we all share in keeping it going.

Much has been made since the passage of House Bill 1 about the improvements to the two research universities and KCTCS—and deservedly so. But I want to talk about the progress—which is equally dramatic—at the other universities. I'll try not to be excessive in using my own institution as an example, because similar, if not greater, progress has been made on other campuses as well.

If you consider the basic tenants, as I understand them, of the Postsecondary Improvement Act, or House Bill 1, in 1997, they were to 1) grow enrollments across the state's postsecondary campuses; 2) impact the economy, create jobs, and solve problems in the regions where universities exist; 3) raise private dollars to improve faculty capacity and enroll the top students; 4) expand our reach through distance learning; and 5) Governor Patton's personal challenge for each campus to identify at least one program that would achieve national prominence.

It is my observation that most of the universities have performed well in these five areas.

Most of the campuses have achieved significant enrollment growth—in part because of stepped-up recruitment efforts, in part because of collaboration with KCTCS in five regional postsecondary education centers established in 1998 as part of higher education reform, in part because statewide economic conditions, in part because of the KEES Program, and in part by dramatic proliferation of distance-learning courses and degree programs. The comprehensive universities have responded in equally impressive fashion with improved retention rates and graduation rates—both contributing to unprecedented enrollment growth. Unfortunately, that growth is occurring at a time when the state is unable to fund that growth. Our challenge is to continue growing well beyond the time when the economy improves and incremental funding is forthcoming. As for distance learning, most of the students enrolled in the Kentucky Virtual University are taking courses created and delivered by faculty at the comprehensive universities; and most of the enrollment in the KYVU is recorded in enrollments at our comprehensive universities. Each campus also has additional distance-learning programs not included in the KYVU.

The campuses have responded in performance heretofore unattained in the pursuit of private support. The *Bucks for Brains* program, while exceedingly generous to the two research universities, has offered some incentive to the other six universities in the form of \$30 million (with another \$20 million hopefully to come in January). This money has been matched with private gifts and is at work in our various foundations in the form of newly endowed professorships, chairs, scholarships, and academic program support. And most of the campuses have raised many millions of dollars above what was needed to meet the *Bucks for Brains* matching challenge. This is new behavior on the part of our universities and our benefactors, largely because of higher education reform.

In my opinion, however, the greatest impact of higher education reform on the comprehensive institutions—and the regions of Kentucky where our universities exist—has been on economic development and faculty engagement. Members of our faculty are at work in identifying and solving problems. Most of the universities created Programs of Distinction. The POD money, along with Action Agenda funding, made available through higher education reform, thrust our faculty into a new environment of applied activity in our respective regions. The POD program and the Action Agenda for some of us caused dramatic changes in our mission. Applied research related to regional needs has solved economic, social, environmental, manufacturing, and educational problems. Because of higher education reform, Kentucky and Kentuckians have benefited from the direct engagement of our faculty and students. Some of the results are new technology in the workplace, new jobs in our regions, new P-12 partnerships, new uses of natural resources, preservation of precious depleted resources, new collaboration with the Economic Development Cabinet in regional innovation and commercialization centers and business incubators, and a new statewide engineering initiative—which at my campus alone has enrolled 330 students in the initiative's second year. I predict that by the time the collaborative new programs with UK and U of L in electrical, mechanical, and civil engineering become accredited, these three engineering disciplines will be among Western's most populated majors. A desperate need for applied practice-based engineering education is being addressed. That's what a comprehensive university must do. With impetus from the POD program, I am also proud to say that sponsored research across our universities has more than doubled—with most of it in applied projects germane to our respective regions.

I have three final points to make—one a bit self-serving and two which I think need to be made.

In 1998, and several times since, Governor Patton challenged our universities to identify at least one program capable of achieving national prominence and build that program to the point where that program might be judged by some valid source as nationally prominent—perhaps the nation's best. Western took that challenge to heart. While we focused most of our POD matching money on the applied sciences because that was more critical to the development of our region, we did push our already strong journalism and broadcasting programs to rise to the Governor's challenge. In 1999, we combined separate departments of journalism, photojournalism, and broadcasting into

one new School of Journalism and Broadcasting. New faculty members were hired and even better students were pursued. In 2000, and again in 2001, Western was judged by the William Randolph Hearst Foundation, the organization which analyzes such programs on an annual basis, as having the nation's number one School of Journalism and Broadcasting. We slipped to number two in 2002, but we hope to reclaim the top ranking in 2003. In 2001, numbers two through ten were: University of North Carolina, University of Florida, Northwestern University, University of Missouri, University of Montana, Syracuse University, Indiana University, University of Alabama, and University of Nebraska. My point is both to brag on our faculty and students whose work was judged to be the best and to illustrate one of the real successes of higher education reform—and one which is a direct result of the Governor's challenge.

The second point cries for some clarification. Some commotion was made several months ago about some of our comprehensive universities engaging in mission "creep"—and my university was specifically mentioned. Well, I want to put that notion to rest. We, all of Kentucky's universities, are not "creeping to" change our mission—we are running just as fast as we can to do so. I, and I believe my colleagues, are fully focused in mission "sprint." The Postsecondary Improvement Act demanded no less, and further higher education reform will demand as much in the future. Missions evolve in response to economic and social conditions. As those missions change, the institutions must also evolve, or be rendered inconsequential. There are few similarities today, on most of our campuses, compared to what one may have found prior to 1997. Our missions have changed dramatically—and for the better. Western, like other institutions, was not at all focused on either growth or economic development, on applied research, or on distance learning, or on being nationally rather than regionally competitive. None of this could have been possible without House Bill 1 or without a Governor, a Legislature, and a Council on Postsecondary Education that both challenged us and provided needed capacity.

In an August 13, 2002, LRC document, the LRC described that our campus governing boards "are supposed to create new mission statements and formulate strategic plans conforming to CPE's strategic agenda." Well, we can't very well create new missions and conform to a bold CPE agenda without at least "creeping" toward being something different than what we have been. I believe we have changed and expanded our impact. And I don't think there has been any "creeping" to it. The Postsecondary Improvement Act has provided the impetus for change, and we have changed. However, the last five years have only been a start, and I truly believe we are only getting started. The next five years are full of promise. I believe that whatever has been achieved across our campuses, individually and collectively, in the last five years will pale in comparison to the changes and progress that will be made in the next five years. I believe the presidents and the Council on Postsecondary Education are dedicated to working together to keep this reform moving and demonstrating that shared commitment to the Legislature and the next Executive Administration. Our pace of change will quicken, and our mission "sprint" will continue. If it doesn't, then shame on us. Kentuckians need and deserve the solutions and enhancements which only a properly funded and engaged faculty can deliver.

My final point is about our individual uniqueness. We have succeeded—for the most part—in helping people understand the term “comprehensive” university. It means just that—a university with a comprehensive array of undergraduate and graduate programs meeting the needs of the public it serves. I think we are about to do away with the term “regional.” It is certainly nowhere to be found in Western’s vocabulary since the passage of House Bill 1. The only way we can effectively serve our region is to be nationally competitive in as many areas as possible. Isn’t that the challenge of the Postsecondary Improvement Act?

In my opinion, a disservice is done every time someone refers to six universities as though they were one. I am referring to the all-inclusive terms “regionals” or “comprehensives.” No other state in America groups a collection of its universities in a one-word descriptor. We--Western, Eastern, Northern, Murray, Morehead, and Kentucky State--are unique institutions with stand-alone governing boards. We have dramatically different demographics. We serve different populations and geographies. The problems in the areas of the state where we are located are different. It is my belief that an inhibitor for the future of higher education reform is a subconscious or conscious effort to stereotype our respective institutions into one grouping. It has nothing to do with funding or collaboration; it has everything to do with institutional identity and the challenge we each face to reach full institutional potential. It is easy or convenient to refer to the “comprehensives”—I have even done so in the last few minutes. But it is not fair to any one of the six. The need for all of the universities to work together with CPE is so critical, but the propensity to group institutions inhibits the individual institution’s confidence in the all-important teamwork we have described today. Only when institutional identity is valued can a group of institutions come together in support of a common cause. We are all capable of great things and should be encouraged to utilize our fiscal, physical, and human resources to achieve our respective institutional potential. Then, and only then, can our collective and collaborative efforts—the efforts of all eight universities, KCTCS, and CPE—fill the true spirit of the Postsecondary Education Improvement Act.

Thank you.